
others. So external conditions are something we cannot do without. We need to have good external conditions to sustain ourselves in a comfortable way.

When we have adequate conditions externally and there are no immediate concerns for our external needs, then we can resolve, 'OK, now I can give some time to meditation'. It would be hard to meditate when you are starving, or when you don't have adequate shelter or clothing and so forth. Therefore, it is a practical approach that it is when we have adequate external conditions, that we can spend some time and energy for meditation, and that can definitely lead to a calmer and happier state of mind.

I have known quite a few elderly people, some of whom have since passed away, but there are many that I know of who are actually in the ripe old age of their late 90s and are quite content and happy. They have a very easy-going demeanour, and are quite calm and happy. One elderly person I know recently made the comment, "In my younger days, I wasn't really very happy. I was in a bit of turmoil. However, through this special practice I have now reached a point where I am feeling quite content and settled." These are good examples for us to look at to prepare ourselves. As we all know, we are all getting older. We are heading towards the elderly years ourselves. As we age, if we can contribute to a happier mind then that will be a significant contribution to our well-being. Rather than getting happier, if we get more confused and sadder, then that would be a sad situation.

We all have a body and, a mind. As I regularly mention, when we relate to an individual self, what we relate to as 'me', 'I', 'the individual person', is naturally connected to our body and mind. We all refer to ourselves as 'me' which is an individual person. In the same breath we say 'my body, my mind'. The body and mind are integral parts of us. Thus our individual well-being is directly related to the well-being of our body and mind. Therefore when we ensure that we contribute to the physical well-being of our body, by having good sound physical health, as well as having a good healthy, clear and calm state of mind, then that definitely will contribute to the individual person who possesses that body and mind—in this case ourselves—experiencing the well-being of a good health of body and mind. That is a significant point that we should consider about our well-being.

Now, having mentioned what contributes to our well-being, we can focus a little bit more on how one achieves the conditions for mental well-being. We might already have quite a good understanding and knowledge of how to acquire the good conditions for our physical well-being. So here it might be significant to really consider the conditions for our mental well-being.

As mentioned previously, one needs to ensure that external conditions don't contribute to distress in our minds and negative states of mind to increase. This is a significant point which I feel you can pay attention to.

This point shows the need for one to do meditation. It shows the need for one to have a more peaceful state of mind.

The opposite to external conditions not affecting one's mind is the situation where the mind does get affected, and becomes completely immersed and carried away with external, material objects, and thus becomes excited and distracted. When the mind becomes excited and distracted it becomes very vulnerable to the various types of afflictions or delusions, basically negative states of mind, arising. When negative states of mind arise within one they manifest as negative thoughts or attitudes and that is what causes one turmoil. They can cause one great distress. All our psychological problems come from the afflictions that arise in our mind.

We need to understand that when afflictions arise in our mind it is not the direct fault of the material things and other people that surround us, but rather because our mind is prone, vulnerable, for the afflictions to arise. We have not applied a control over our mind. We have not subdued our mind. Thus our mind becomes subject to the afflictions arising. Therefore what one needs to do, what meditation training involves, is to start to contain our mind, so that it does not become completely distracted and immersed in these sensual distractions. When the mind is contained and more focused it naturally becomes more controlled. And when the mind is controlled it naturally becomes more subdued. The incomparable teacher, the Buddha, mentioned that 'a subdued mind is a happy mind'. What the Buddha is saying in this line is that when the mind is not affected or controlled by the afflictions, negative thoughts and so forth, it is a naturally tranquil and calm mind, a happy mind.

I regularly spend significant time explaining the benefits of meditation, but again I want you to understand how the result of the practice of meditation is a more peaceful state of mind. Now with the practice that we apply at our level, we can't really hope to experience a peaceful state of mind that has completely uprooted the afflictions. That is not something that we can hope for because we have not achieved that yet. That is a state that has to be reached gradually, and we may not have reached that state of completely uprooting and abandoning the delusions from our mind. While we may not be able to experience that level of tranquillity of mind yet, what we can manage to do with our meditation is to try to overcome the very strong manifest levels of afflictions in our mind. The intensity of the afflictions in the mind can definitely be reduced by the practice of meditation. What is significant for our level is if we have a choice where we can have some sort of control over our state of mind, and not allow ourselves to be completely influenced by the afflictions, such as anger and so forth, then such a mind would be relatively calmer and more peaceful mind. And that can contribute to our well-being at our level right now.

One of the main things to understand about our meditation practice is that we are attempting to overcome discursive, irrational states of mind, the Tibetan word is 'superstitious' thoughts, that cause one unnecessary fears, worries, anxieties. What causes these irrational fears, worries and anxieties is an overly discursive state of mind, a mind which is hypersensitive, hyperactive. We need to recognise and understand where our faulty mind goes off the rails, so to speak, and where we start to

follow the irrational thoughts and fears that occur. It is what is called 'discursive states of mind' that cause all these unwanted states of mind. We tend to give into them, and believe in them, and that is what causes us irrational fears.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said that a lot of our mental and psychological problems are caused by these irrational fears. He gives an account from his own life as a young child. He was going around the Potala Palace and he was warned not to go into some dark rooms. He was told 'there are ghosts in there'. He said he would then start to feel a little bit afraid. Even though there might be no ghosts around, just because he was told that he was given that fear. That is an example of irrational fear that arises from our discursive state of mind. Therefore we need to apply means and methods to overcome this discursive state of mind. Then, as the discursive state of mind, which is the cause of all our unwanted fears, worries and so forth subsides, we naturally experience a more peaceful, calmer, clear and bright state of mind.

In short, we need to recognise there are many states of mind within us that are unwanted. We need to expel them. There are many unwanted irrational thoughts we need to get rid of.

Having mentioned that there are many unwanted thoughts, irrational fears and worries within us, the question is why do we need to get rid of them? Because they are unhelpful. They cause turmoil. They are detrimental to our well-being. How do we expel them? How do we get rid of these unwanted negative thoughts and so forth? Here we need to understand that every irrational fear, thought, worry or anxiety that we have only occurs in our mind in relation to focusing on an object. Without an object to focus on, we cannot have these thoughts. The very function of the mind is to cognise an object. The object we are focusing on causes a certain kind of thought to arise in the mind.

When we understand this point and how our mind works and how all of our discursive occur in relation to focusing on certain objects, we will begin to understand that if we were to prevent our mind from focusing on those objects, then naturally it would not experience the consequences of having disturbing thoughts, fears, anxieties, worries and so forth.

In the meditation method and technique we intentionally choose an *appropriate* object to focus on. By choosing an appropriate object that does not cause discursive thoughts to arise in our mind, the mind will naturally settle down and become quieter and more tranquil. As I mention regularly, there are many things that we are better not to focus on. Especially in relation to past memories and so forth, there are many things it is better that we just forget because the more we think about them, and dwell on them, the more anxiety, fear and uncomfortable feelings they cause. Therefore, we come to detect that there are many things that it's better to forget about. That is easier said than done, however it is possible. One can slowly, gradually clear one's mind from all that clutter, unwanted thoughts and memories, injuries, hurt, all of that. We can clear our mind of that. Therefore, the meditation technique here is to choose an

appropriate object and place our full attention and focus on that. That is what we are training to do.

When we understand the full implications of the broader positive effects of meditation we begin to naturally become more interested in meditation. When we see the benefits of it we will naturally be inclined to try to put it into practice. Here again, I need to emphasise that one need not feel that one has to be a religious person. Regardless of whether one considers oneself a religious person or not, or even Buddhist or not, I often mention that people that come here definitely don't need to feel that they have to be Buddhist in order to practise meditation. The main point is that it is a proven technique that definitely has positive benefits. If you were to apply it and put it into practice, you might experience the positive results of that.

Another way to emphasise the benefits of meditation is to see the way that it serves as a protection for one's mind. This is really a significant point. So we may wonder, 'What do we need to protect our mind from?' From none other than what we call the afflictions. The word 'afflictions'—some translators use the word delusions—encompasses many states of mind that affect us in negative ways. Another way to understand the afflictions in simple, colloquial terms is 'disturbing states of mind'. In fact that is the definition of affliction in one of the Buddhist manuals: the moment it arises, that which causes one distress and an unsettled feeling is an affliction. If one wonders if a certain state of mind is an affliction or not, just check whether it causes distress or not, whether one feels a little bit agitated. The moment one feels a little bit disturbed internally, not settled and calm, then that is a clear sign that an affliction is arising in one's mind and we need to apply the means and ways to overcome that.

To explain the actual meditation technique. First of all meditation involves focusing on an object. Meditation is training the mind to be focused. The particular meditation that we adopt here, which is attempting to develop single-pointed focus, requires an appropriate object to focus on. I specifically mention here 'an appropriate object' for us beginners in contrast to meditation manuals which are for those who have already developed a certain level of concentration, and are attempting to develop a significant meditative state called 'calm abiding'. It says in the manuals that meditators can choose any object to develop their concentration. However, for us beginners this would be unsuitable advice, because we are still at the stage where our minds are very vulnerable to being influenced by negative objects.

To give an example, when we are still very vulnerable to attachment or desire arising and manifesting within us, and we choose an object that causes desire or attachment to arise it would not contribute to our well-being. It would just cause more excitement and eventually distress us and cause turmoil in our mind. Therefore an attractive object would not be a suitable object for a beginner meditator. Thus for beginner meditators who need to overcome desire and attachment the object to focus on is specifically described as an unattractive object, an object

that does not excite the mind, and the focus is on the natural defects and imperfections of the object. That is how it is explained in the teachings on meditation. This is just a point for us to understand.

Then the next point is that having chosen an appropriate object, preferably a positive object or a neutral object that does not cause delusions to arise in the mind, one needs to first recognise it by acquainting oneself with the object, clearly recognising the object first. Then in the meditation we are focusing on an *image* of the object, rather than the object itself. One needs to understand that in the meditation when we talk about focusing on the object, it is not a visual concentration. The concentration is not done by the visual eye but rather by the mind. Therefore, if you were to think that you need to look at an object that is already a mistaken approach because you cannot develop concentration with your visual consciousness. Rather it is the mental consciousness, the mind. It is the specific mental factor within the mind called concentration that is to be developed. Therefore it is a mental image of whatever object we choose, that one focuses on. When we focus on that mental image it is said that one needs to reach a point where it is as if the mind, which is focusing on the object, and the object itself merge and become one. It is at that stage then one would be able to maintain a very good focus and concentration on the object which will then further develop. This is the general instruction.

These are significant points to keep in mind, because you would find in the meditation manuals that one can use any object. This implies that you can also use a physical object. However, even if one were to use a physical object to focus on, every meditation manual emphasises that one needs to be focusing on an *inner* object. If it were to be an external object, the form that one is focusing on does not become an inner object because it is an external object. So how do we understand this? How do we interpret this? To understand it in a fuller context, the external object is something we need to familiarise ourselves with first, to recognise it well. Then, after we see it well with our eyes, we close our eyes and when we are not looking at the object we will have a clear image of the object. Then it is that mental image of the external object that we need to be focusing on. As the great meditation master Lama Tsong Khapa said, focusing on an object of form means to focus on the aspect of that object. That is another way to understand it. It is the mental image or aspect.

Now the object that we regularly choose to focus on for our meditation here is our breath. Thus we are focusing on an image of the breath. As an object it is not too complex, elaborate or difficult. It is something very intimate; it is our own breath that we are focusing on. It is an easy object to focus on but it is said to be a very significant object, especially for beginners who have lots of discursive thoughts. Focusing on the breath is said to be one of the best antidotes for overcoming discursive thoughts. While it isn't the antidote to overcome discursive thoughts completely, it definitely helps to overcome the manifest levels of discursive thoughts, and settle down the mind to a significant degree. Therefore it is said to be a very appropriate object for beginners to

focus on. That mind of focusing on the breath would not, of course, be considered a very virtuous state of mind. It's just a neutral state of mind. However, in attempting to develop concentration it is said to be a virtuous mind, because of the concentration itself. However, the main point here is that we choose the breath to focus on for our meditation practice.

It is said that there are those who focus on the breath as a preliminary practice, and those who focus on the breath as an actual practice of meditation. The preliminary practice is what we are attempting to do here and this is said to be a means to overcome the very excited or discursive state of mind. Therefore, prior to engaging in meditation practice meditators would focus on the breath. It is said that if you can focus on your breath without distraction for at least 21 rounds of your breath, one in breath and one out breath being one round, the mind will come to a very neutral state. A neutral state means a mind that is may not yet be positive, but is not affected by a lot of discursive thoughts. One reaches a very nice state, a calm state, and that neutral state of mind is a very significant state of mind.

The analogy that is used is that of a stainless mirror, a mirror which is very clean. When a mirror is very clean it can reflect objects very clearly. Thus a preliminary meditation is like cleaning a mirror, cleaning our own mind, in this case, of discursive thoughts. Then, from that neutral state, it becomes very easy to meditate on positive objects. That is the preliminary practice of focusing on the breath. In the Buddhist text called *Abhidharma*, it says that those who want to develop concentration reaching a state of calm abiding can choose the breath as an object. Such practitioners would use the breath itself to achieve that state of calm abiding.

Of course, as I have mentioned previously, but just to remind again, one applies two essential tools to develop a good meditation. One is called mindfulness and the other introspection. With the aid of mindfulness and introspection one is able to overcome the two main faults in meditation, which are excitement at one end of the spectrum and laxity at the other end. I will not go into detail again this evening, however just keep that in mind.

While we are meditating it is said that the breath needs to be free from being laboured or deep and shallow breathing in and out. Rather use a natural breath. Come to a state where you have a natural breath without making any sound when you're breathing in and out. There is a particular term in Tibetan which means a breath that is free from unequal breaths such as a long in-breath and a short out-breath, or short in-breaths and long out-breaths. It should be free from that be natural breathing.

The significance of this specific instruction to have natural breathing is that when we are focusing on our breath we need to ensure that the breathing itself does not become a distraction. That is the main point. Normally, as we go about our everyday life, we don't think much about our breath. We just breathe in and breathe out. We might not really notice the different patterns of breathing and so forth. But in meditation, if we suddenly intentionally try to regulate our breath then

if it's too forceful or too laboured when you feel the air going in and out it might tickle your nostrils or your lips and that itself will become a distraction. [*Geshe-la laughs*] The instruction is to specifically avoid a laboured breath or long inhalation and long exhalation. Rather, we use a breath that is seemingly very still, very natural labourless breathing. With some other specific meditation practices such as where one is training one's mind to develop love and compassion in the practice called 'giving and taking', taking' in the sufferings of others and giving one's happiness out to others, it is advised to use forceful breathing in and forceful breathing out as a way to emphasise that practice of taking and giving. For the meditation practice we are doing now it has to be a natural breath.

It is important to get a good understanding of the meditation technique prior to engaging in meditation practice. In focusing on the breath, as explained in the teachings and specifically in the lam rim teachings, we can't see our breath and we should not be obsessed with the air going in and out but rather *imagining* seeing the breath coming in and going out, and keeping a count of that. One part of one's mind is just fully aware of each breath coming in and going out. The concentration that we are developing is being fully mindful of the breath coming in and going out. That is the focus we are engaging in with this practice.

Now to actually engage in this practice we can readjust our body to be in an upright and relaxed posture. Then, in our mind we need to ensure that we are going to commit ourselves to just focusing on our breath. So we intentionally withdraw our focus from all other external objects or internal thoughts, memories and so forth, and just leave all of that aside for a while. We just bring our full attention and focus inward to where we are sitting, and contain our focus within. Then we bring our full attention and focus to the breath and become fully aware of the breath naturally coming in to our nostrils and as we breathe out we are fully aware of the breath leaving our nostrils. So, in this way we will keep our attention and focus on that for the next few minutes. [*meditation*]

Before we conclude and while we are still in a relatively focused mind let us this time use our meditation to focus on the sound of the name mantra of Buddha Shakyamuni being recited. As we hear this chant we try to maintain a complete focus on the sound of the mantra. When the recitation subsides, just remain in that state of awareness and focus as if there is no object. It is like a vacuity. Just maintain that focus for a while.

TAYATHA OM MUNI MUNI MAHA MUNAYE SOHA

*Transcribed by Peter Boothby
Edit 1 by John Burch
Edit 2 by Venerable Michael Lobsang Yeshe
Edited Version
© Tara Institute*